A Memoir: “Beshert - It Was Meant To Be”

Written by Roma Talasiewicz-Eibuszyc
Translated from Polish by Suzanna Eibuszyc, Edited by Cora Schwartz

Part 1: “At the Mercy of Our Luck”. (Warsaw, Poland, April 1917 - November 1939)
Part 2: “The Troubles I’ve Seen”. (Southwestern Russia and Uzbekistan, November 1939 - March 1946)

Dedicated to our mother’s brothers and sisters: Adek, Pola, Sala, Andzia and Sevek, and to our father’s family who remains mostly nameless but not forgotten.

Prologue

On the day of her death in 2006 I found a box containing the pages of my mother’s diary. In a thin, shaky handwriting she recalled heart-searing memories that began with being born a Jew in Warsaw in 1917. I proceeded to translate her story from Polish to English. I quickly realized how important it was that the stories of her life, as well as the lives of her family not perish with their deaths. I respectfully present my mother, Roma Talasiewicz’ memoir that she, and those whom she loved may continue to live.

CHAPTER ONE

June 22, 1976

My daughters have convinced me to write about my life. Painful though this will be, I have decided that they are right. I do this not so much to preserve my own story, but rather that my brothers and sisters will not have perished with their stories untold. I risk feeling again the tormented sleep on an open field with one, thin blanket between me and the sky. My stomach will again be gnawed away by the constant hunger. I will see the German planes over Warsaw and hear the explosions of bombs. Will those who read of my life be ready for the lice, the humiliation, and the never-ending fever and chills of Malaria? Will they understand that it is possible to lose ones mother two times? Should I describe the beatings that put Sevek at the edge of death, or the cold that seeped into my bones and never quite left? They tell me I am to ‘bear witness’, that I ‘have an obligation’. So be it. It was beshert, meant to be that I live the life I’ve had, and I suppose beshert that I now write what I remember:
We lived in a poor Jewish neighborhood in Warsaw where there were no bathrooms or running water inside our apartments. It was only later on in history that this neighborhood was termed a ghetto. Regardless of what it was called the poverty was all around me, and the reality was that in order to wash up or relieve myself; I had to use a large public bathroom that was in the courtyard of our building. I tried not to go there more often than absolutely necessary as the bathroom was dirty and scary as well. The containers where every family threw garbage were also right there in the courtyard. This lack of sanitation contributed greatly to the spread of tuberculosis, typhus and dysentery. By some miracle our family was spared these diseases. Yet there were many times in later years, as I slept in the cold of an open field, or when I last saw my brother the day he came back from Stalin’s Labor Camps, or when all the horrible events that overtook my family came about, it was then that I wondered. Might it have been better to have succumbed to these diseases and been spared what was to be our lives?

I am told that when I was born on April 16th, 1917 the people of Warsaw were plagued with hunger and typhus. Under German occupation, which would last for one more year, many Polish citizens had been sent to forced labor camps, leaving behind the rest of us to starve. It was during this time also that Tsar Nicholas II was dethroned by his own people in Russia. In Poland there were revolutionaries who sympathized with the overthrowing of the Tsar, many of them were Jews. The dream in 1918 post war Poland was to somehow follow in the footsteps of Lenin’s ideology, where everyone would be equal. This dream appealed to the majority of Polish Jews who were poor, exploited, had little or no education, and lived in overcrowded tenement buildings. There were some wealthy business owners who were Polish Jews, but not many.

I was the sixth and last child born to Bluma Symehause and Pinkus Talasiewicz. My parents named me Rajzla, although on the streets of Warsaw I was called by my Polish name, Roma. I am told that my father, like most men of our class and time worked two jobs to support us. Mother’s job, to raise her six children as best she could was even more difficult. Like all Jewish women of her class and generation she did not have a job outside of the home, instead she raised a large family. Mother came from a poor, religious family; her mother stayed home as well and raised eight children. Mother’s was the last generation to have many children and live like their parents before them.

We lived in a tiny fourth floor apartment in an old tenement building on 54 Nowolipki Street. That apartment comes back to me in my dreams. I see the eight of us living in one room although in reality I could never have seen this; I was a one year-old baby, and the First WW had not yet ended when my thirty-six year old father died. It was a sudden death from something as simple as an ear infection. When I was older, I remember going with mother to the cemetery. A cut down tree trunk marked his grave.

I can not imagine how mother managed with no husband and six young children in a city ravaged by war where most everyone was struggling to survive. My oldest brother, Adek was twelve at the time father died. It was a blessing that the owner of the textile factory where father worked let Adek take father’s job. I am sure that it was thanks to that owner’s generosity that we survived that first year, as well as later on. My twin sisters...
Pola and Sala were eleven, and as hungry as we were Mother did not have the heart to send them off to work. That this was not the case with other parents says so much about my mother. Many children were sent to work at a younger age than twelve. My sister Andza and brother Sevek were seven and four, at the time of father’s death.

My first memories still haunt me to this day. I don’t know how old I was but I see myself with my brothers and sisters, hungry, cold and alone in our room waiting for Mother to return. It is not difficult, even now, to feel the gnawing hunger and the cold in my bones from that day. I sat on the edge of the narrow bed I shared with Mother and watched the door for hours, just waiting for her to come home. We didn’t know where she had gone but she had been gone all day. My fear that she was never coming home grew stronger as darkness descended. We were forbidden to light the kerosene lamp when we were alone. I remember how mother looked when the door opened. She was disheveled and out of breath as though she had been chased. She paused for a few seconds, walked over to me, and gave me the small piece of bread she clutched to her chest. I devoured it. Intellectually, rationally there is no reason to feel guilty today about turning away from my starving brothers and sisters. I know I was too young to be accountable. But in my heart, I ask myself over and over, how could I have eaten this piece of bread and not shared even a bite?

In 1919 when the twins turned twelve they went to work. They worked long hours for low wages and their efforts barely helped at home. In those days most employers took advantage of working children, so Pola and Sala were paid only a fraction of what adult workers earned. It seems that when father was alive, the family had managed in the tiny apartment. However, now my mother could no longer pay the rent. As unbelievable as it might sound today, she finally broke down and rented our kitchen to a couple who had one son. As the family grew, there were soon five people living in our kitchen.

Our family of seven lived in one room that was always dark, even in the daytime. The sun never reached our small window. I remember how I blew on the window to defrost it in the winter. I wanted so much to see what was going on outside. I guess it became a habit of sorts. Even today, I will sit for hours looking out my apartment window, watching life go by in the streets of New York.

At night, the one kerosene lamp lit my life. We had two beds, three chairs, a large table and a dresser. We slept two in a bed and at night mother unfolded an additional bed. Since we were seven, my older siblings took turns sleeping on a hay-stuffed mattress that mother placed on top of the table. This was the least comfortable place to sleep, but I can still remember the anticipation of stuffing the mattress with fresh hay that brought its sweet smell to our room. We did this every spring before Passover.

Regardless of how little money she had to feed us, mother secretly saved for the whole year to make sure we had a proper, religious Passover. She made sure we understood the importance of this holiday, and of celebrating the Exodus of our people from Egypt. Today, when I contemplate Mother saving like this, in view of the fact that on many days we had practically nothing to eat, I am struck by her devotion to her faith. Then too we barely saw her awake for the last six weeks before the holiday. Mother along with the other Jewish women in our neighborhood made matzoth (unleavened, crisp bread) by hand, all night in a bakery to earn a little money. I remember
how we tiptoed around so she could sleep during the day. Those six weeks were difficult for all of us, but we understood and respected what Mother was doing.

Before Passover, as is the custom for generations, everything was washed and cleaned, and the night before we checked our room one last time to make sure not even a crumb of bread was overlooked. When I look back now, I realize how purely ritualistic this custom was. In reality we searched for a crumb in a one room apartment that barely had bread for more than a few minutes at any given time to begin with.

Passover began at sunset, and ended with a traditional Seder dinner (specially prepared meal) late into the night. Mother always put me to bed in the late afternoon for a long nap so I too could stay up late at night with the rest of the family. Aside from the religious part, and of course the extra food, I looked forward to Passover because it meant spring was coming. Spring meant I wouldn’t be cold all the time. Soon I would be breathing fresh, warm air. It also meant I would be allowed to leave our dark apartment, where the sun never reached and play with the other children in our courtyard. How I ran down those stairs! I’d step out into the courtyard and take a long, deep breath. I fill my lungs with spring air and turn my white face toward the sun, welcoming its warm rays.

I was small for my age, and very quiet. I was also sick a lot. The children loved to make fun of me although I didn’t know why. I was in such rapture being out there in the warm sun I had no idea my back was growing round from lack of vitamins, although I did know that I lived with almost constant hunger. I dreaded those times when, due to my poor diet my leg bones popped out of their joints. At first I’d cried for mother but after a while the pain in her face was even worse than the physical pain. Besides, there was nothing much she could do. Medical care was primitive and just about non-existent, and most of the families in our neighborhood would not have been able to afford medical help anyway. Yes, there were home remedies like using young onion shoots for skin infections. I don’t know how effective they were but even now, when I smell an onion I feel better.

When I was six years old my tongue erupted with an infection that no home remedy could cure. Mother used the last of her money to take me to a doctor’s assistant, a much less expensive way to get medical help. We came home with a liquid that was supposed to be put on my tongue every day. For some reason it was my older brother, Adek’s job to wrap a stick in cotton and cover my tongue with the awful medicine. I cried bitterly every time from the pain but after two weeks I was not only happy for myself, but for Adek too. He was so proud that my tongue was completely healed.

I was too young to remember when the war ended in 1918 but Mother described to me many times how wives with eyes and arms raised towards the sky begged God for the safe return of their husbands. Children too danced happily around their mothers waiting to be rejoined with their fathers. Mother put her hands over her face as she finished the war story. “Of course my husband was not coming home, she said with a stifled sob. “I had only the black earth that covered his body.” I understood at a very young age that her husband, our father was never coming home.

I often wonder, even now what it would be like to have and to be loved by a father. I never saw a photograph so I don’t know what my father looked like. I was told he was a tall, thin man who was a good husband and devoted father. One of nine
children, also from a very religious but a well-off family, he worked in a textile factory. His other job was in the back room of a pharmacy which was considered, in those days an important job. I did know of his parents somewhat, especially my grandfather, who was a well-known man in the Jewish community. He was a rabbi and a teacher who owned a private traditional Jewish school, otherwise known as a Cheder. To attend Grandfather’s Cheder, which accommodated about forty male students, for financial reasons one had to come from an affluent family. The Cheder was located on Stawki Street, which was across the street from where we lived. The school was situated on a nice piece of land and was surrounded by grass and a fence with a gate that was almost always locked. To the side of this property, stood a small house, the Cheder was on the ground floor; my grandparents lived above it with their one, spinster daughter. Grandfather was a middle-aged, intensely serious man who wore traditional black clothing. He always walked with a fashionable walking stick. A well respected member of our community, I saw people bowing to him and stop him for advice. Grandfather was feared by his students and was known for disciplining them often. Before my father died, Adek was allowed to attend Grandfather’s Cheder for free. This was the only act of kindness we ever received from our father’s family.

There was that one summer morning when Mother sent me and the younger siblings to visit Grandfather. Mother didn’t say it, but I understood that she was hoping that just once, Grandfather would be kind and give us something. I was too young to question why Grandfather was so indifferent to us, and even now I have this burning need to better understand the reason he had forsaken us. The truth is I always knew the answer. Deep in my heart there is the hurtful and shameful memory that I have kept buried for all these years.

I can still remember my mother telling me, with her head hanging low as if in shame how our affluent Grandfather never approved of his son’s marriage to her. At the time of their marriage, not only the Polish favored a class society. The Jewish community did as well. Although mother and father both came from very religious backgrounds, each came from a different socio-economic class. It was for this reason that my Grandfather never forgave his son for marrying beneath his class. Mother was a motherless girl from a poor family who was less educated than father’s. This marriage and the grandchildren, Grandfather never accepted. That Adek was allowed to go to Grandfather’s school for free, as I mentioned earlier, says that there must have been some acknowledgement when father was still alive. With father’s death whatever acceptance existed, ceased. I know now as I write this that Grandfather’s rejection and denial of me and my family was a trauma that I never put behind me. It haunts me even now.

Countless times I relive that day Mother sent us there. A very tall and wiry Grandfather opened the door. It happened so quickly we hardly had time to turn and run. As soon as he saw us he grabbed his walking stick, with which he always walked on the street and with it he proceeded to chase us away. We were so startled and shocked that all three of us tumbled down the stairs. There were tears and humiliation in Mother’s eyes when I told her what happened. She never sent us there again. Father’s family became as if strangers to us. Mother said it was just as well, that it was obvious that the man we called our Grandfather was not concerned with his son’s children’s welfare. Following
my mother’s example, and as young as I was, my heart filled with humiliation that later turned to hate.

Mother, on the other hand came from a warm, kind family, of eight siblings. They visited us often and we remained close for twenty-two years. I never saw them give mother any material help but that doesn’t mean they didn’t. I do know they were there with the emotional support she needed. I was told that my grandmother died young. I knew my grandfather, who lived near us, was elderly and lived alone but mother never took me to visit him. She visited him often but always went alone. The only thing I ever found out was he never helped his daughter or grandchildren because he was very stingy. This didn’t make sense to me as the families around us all helped each other as best they could. At that time it was customary to keep saved money under a mattress instead of putting it in the bank. I often heard my mother worry out loud that one of her biggest fears was upon his death; the neighbors would be the first to get to her father’s money. The morning someone knocked on our door with the news of my grandfather’s death, I watched mother run to where Grandfather lived. By the time she got there the bag of money he kept under the mattress was gone.